



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 1 | Issue 2

Article 8

7-15-1982

Virgin

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Recommended Citation

Klause, Annette Curtis (1982) "*Virgin*," *Mythellany*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythellany/vol1/iss2/8>

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Mythcon 51: A VIRTUAL “HALFLING” MYTHCON

July 31 - August 1, 2021 (Saturday and Sunday)

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Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

Abstract

I could catch a unicorn from the mystic wood.

Keywords

Poetry; Mythellany; Mythopoeic; Virgin; Annette Curtis Klause

make a little money of their own on the side.

The two returned having gained the permission they sought with flattery, politeness, and in the end, a few guineas. A message waited for Ravnina, although it was really for Paeter. It was made of only two cards, the Wheel of Fortune and the Lame One. A plain dark-blue card signed it.

"It's from your sorcerer," Ravnina read, "He says for us to 'break a leg.'"

Paeter turned pale, expecting sharp pain to shatter his legs any moment. "He's cursed us then, hasn't he? Even from this far away."

None of the other actors said a word, but they did not look the slightest bit worried.

"No, my little silly one, don't you know what 'break a leg' means? I suppose I forgot to explain it to you when you joined. Actors never wish each other 'good luck'; they tell each other to 'break a leg' instead. Your sorcerer was only sending us his best wishes for the play tonight." She seemed puzzled for a moment. "I wonder how he knew that."

"He knows a lot of things," Paeter supplied, not entirely reassured.

Whether or not Shahendra's good wishes had anything to do with it or not, the performance that night was splendid. Paeter's defiant "O that I could swear the impossible to be true/ And squeeze Necessity to its smallest size!" drew loud applause, and the "So this day ends in grief!" scene was very moving, but nothing in the play compared with the effect produced by "Dragon Song" when Paeter and Ravnina rode onto the stage on one of the wagon's winged and plumed horses. At the end of the song, Paeter made the horse rear, and while its front legs were still kicking, the devil made everything vanish into darkness in an instant by throwing two wet blankets over the candles to extinguish the light.

They traveled the coast road for a week, stopping every evening to perform in one of the towns. Everywhere, their skill transported the audience to such wonder and excitement that the Count of the Southern Shore heard of them and sent a member of his staff to commission them to perform at his court at Donattur during the summer festival.

Paeter, who had never seen anything larger than his own village fair, found the wild, busy crowds more than he had imagined. There were open food stalls and dancing all night long. The nobility had come, too. Every afternoon, knights from Donattur challenged visitors to the joust. A local champion, Varnat, was particularly good. He demonstrated

a superb control of his lance and was unhorsed only once throughout the whole tournament.

Paeter, fascinated, watched every afternoon. At first the spectacle and the noise had confused him, but as he saw the rules and styles, it seemed that the knights moved more clumsily in their armor than he ever had felt in his stage armor. They handled their horses carelessly, leaving it to their esquires to settle them after each charge. Just for a moment, he allowed himself to imagine that he was the champion in the joust.

The troupe had rooms in one wing of Count Mollitor's stark, granite castle. They worked hard to prepare special effects and new endings for their noble audience.

Ravnina had played for nobility before. She knew how to use the indoor sounds to draw her select audience closer to the drama. Tonight, they could not help but let themselves be drawn. She held their passions in her hand by the end of the second act when she wept, "Leave songs of youth to happier days/ Old fingers cannot play the livelier tunes/ I must have silence now."

"Dragon Song" did not rouse the court the way it had excited other audiences. Perhaps the nobles had a more sophisticated taste. Still, they applauded warmly as was polite. Then the count and countess rose to their feet. The rest of the court rose, too. The applause swelled as the actors took a second, final bow. The count beckoned them down from the stage and shook their hands firmly one by one.

"You shall always be welcome here at Donattur," he told them, "Please think of yourselves as my personal troupe from now on."

Wine was brought into the hall to honor the actors. The court mingled with the performers asking questions and making comments on the play. Apparently here, the nobility took drama quite seriously and discussion was part of the entertainment.

Paeter and Ravnina had just turned away from a conversation with the countess when Sir Varnat cut across the room and grabbed Ravnina by the hand.

"Come with me!" he growled lewdly in a voice thick with wine. He tried to force her into a nearby shadowy passage.

Paeter laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Let go of her," he said to him, "sir!"

The count, ever watchful and correct, came over and remonstrated with Varnat who, being drunk, did not listen.

"She's but an actress after all," he leered.

At that insult, Paeter punched Varnat in the mouth. He was surprised how easily the burly knight fell. Varnat sprang up with an oath, but Paeter wrestled him to the floor with a vicious crossface hold he had often used on the pigs at home.

The count, an esthetic man, seeing his knight in a position for listening, said, "Wait, Varnat. This saddens me that this has happened between my best knight and my best actor, especially such a strong actor. Paeter, can I ask you to apologise to Sir Varnat? I would hope that he would not insist on your punishment if the quarrel ended here, even though you are his inferior. I'm sure he will agree. He is an honorable knight."

Varnat cut the count short. "I'm the agrieved party,"

VIRGIN

I could catch a unicorn
from the mystic wood.
You could not catch a unicorn
even if you would.

But unicorns are hard to find
'though I search here and there.
While I could catch a unicorn
there's not one anywhere.

by Annette Curtis Klause